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Bridging the Gap: Preparing Teachers to Meet the Needs of ELLs through Service-Learning

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Abstract

Although the U.S. student population has become increasingly diverse, our teaching force does not reflect equal levels of diversity. Teacher education programs are charged with the task of preparing pre-service teachers to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. This paper addresses one option for providing pre-service teachers with diversity experiences by offering a short term service-learning program abroad. Research has shown that pre-service teachers feel more prepared to meet the needs of English learners after their participation in international experiences with service-learning or study abroad. This paper presents practical guidance for teacher educators who wish to start a service-learning program for pre-service teachers.

Education statistics show that the disparity between the background of U.S. students and their teachers has grown over the years. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. teaching force consists of a large majority of white teachers at approximately 83% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). However, a diverse population of English language learners (ELLs) continues to grow nationally and is currently at approximately 10% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). With our extremely diverse student population, there is an increasing need to prepare our pre-service teachers to bridge the cultural gap between themselves and their students in order to equip them with skills to bridge the achievement gap. Although college and university teacher preparation programs offer cultural diversity courses and field experiences in an effort to raise awareness of the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, the reality is that many of our pre-service teachers do not feel prepared to meet the needs of English learners and some do not have any meaningful interaction with non-native speakers of English before they begin teaching (Lucas, Villegas & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Farrell, 2007).

What is service-learning?

According to Eyler and Giles (1999), service-learning experiences combine meaningful service with learning goals as a form of experiential education where learning occurs through active participation and reflection. Service-learning is intended to benefit both the volunteer who performs the service and the community that receives the service. For service-learning to have educational value for the volunteer, projects must include carefully planned and simultaneous integration with an academic course (LeSourd, 1997). Projects can take place both in the local community or may take place abroad in environments such as homeless shelters, school

programs, or homes for the elderly. Service-learning projects are becoming increasingly popular at both the secondary and post-secondary level throughout the U.S. From 2001-2005, there was a 20% increase of community service performed by college students and the state of Maryland has mandated a service-learning requirement for graduating high school students (Jones, Segar & Gasiorski, 2008). A service-learning project abroad is one way to combine service to others with an opportunity to interact with speakers of other languages. As part of a university program, the student learning can be emphasized by providing a service-learning experience with academic tasks involving discussions and written assignments intended to guide the student to reflect on cross-cultural experiences and critically analyze what they have learned as a result of the service-learning experience.

Why service-learning for pre-service teachers??

The challenge faced by teacher educators is to find ways to enhance pre-service teachers' experiences with diversity before they enter the classroom. One way to accomplish the goal of providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to interact with non-native speakers of English is through a service-learning project abroad. Studies show that international experiences, such as study abroad, "force examination of personal beliefs, habits, and values; and force a commitment to open-mindedness," (Mahan & Stachowski, 1992, p. 506). While participating in study abroad, participants have experiences that challenge their personal beliefs in a way that may not be possible without leaving a comfortable and familiar environment. Semester study abroad programs offer excellent experiences, but may be too costly and time-consuming for many pre-service teachers; however, a short term service-learning experience may fit the schedules and budgets of many. The purpose of this article is to discuss the benefits of a short term service-learning experience and to provide some practical guidance for teacher educators who may be considering this type of experience for the future teachers of our nation's ELLs.

One of the most powerful reasons to consider an intercultural service-learning experience as part of a teacher preparation program is the opportunity that service-learning can provide for pre-service teachers to challenge their cultural stereotypes. According to Sheffield (2005), service-learning participants grow in their understanding of diversity because of "the realization that we have an ethical responsibility to connect with each other through community service," (p.52). Participants of service-learning can learn valuable lessons about culture because of the relationships that are formed during the experience. In a study conducted on a service-learning project as part of a teacher preparation program, participants were asked to complete service-learning in a tutoring program for children of Mexican immigrants. Prior to the service-learning program, participants indicated that statistics regarding Latino dropout rates had led them to believe that many Latinos do not care about education. As the participants in the study began their service project, they reported that the personal relationships they formed with Mexican-Americans broke down their stereotypes and changed their deficit views of Latinos (Hale, 2008). Through their service-learning work, participants' earlier ideas were challenged when they learned that the families of their students in the tutoring program value work and have a great deal of respect for teachers.

Hale's study provides us with an example of the benefits that can be achieved from a service-learning project without going abroad. However, providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to complete a service-learning project abroad increases the benefits. According to a study by Rodriguez (2011), pre-service teachers who had participated in an immersion trip and spent time observing classrooms in Bolivia reported beliefs of possessing a higher cultural sensitivity and felt better prepared to teach students of diverse cultural backgrounds after their return from Bolivia. Research shows that participation in an international experience raises students' awareness of cultural realities that differ from their own because of an increased appreciation for the differences that exist in others (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). According to Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen & Swapp (2012), travel abroad allows participants to "reformulate previously held frames of reference with regard to their own culturally constructed beliefs, particularly with regard to issues of power, privilege, agency and connection," (p. 174). In this study, U.S. university students travelled to South Africa for a summer study abroad experience and reported feelings of "challenge and uneasiness" because of their perceptions of the vast differences between themselves and people of the host culture (p.176). When travelling abroad, students must leave their comfortable environment where they can easily navigate daily affairs in their first language to enter a world where they are the outsiders and everything is suddenly unfamiliar. For example in Trilokekar & Kukar's study (2011), North American university students who completed a study abroad experience in Asia became aware of ways their race defines them and felt like outsiders as they became aware of their differences in ways they hadn't thought of before. According to Trilokekar & Kukar (2011), this experience raises empathy for ELs as participants learn what it means to be a minority. In other words, pre-service teachers who participate in service-learning abroad will know what it feels like to carry the label "foreigner".

Planning a service-learning experience

So how does a teacher educator start to plan a service-learning project abroad? The idea of leading a student trip abroad as a faculty leader may seem daunting, but can be successful with proper planning. First, the faculty leader will need to take care of logistical details such as securing approval from the college or university and establishing a time frame. A short term service-learning experience offers flexibility in scheduling because it can take place over a break, an abbreviated term, or in the summer. Finding a time that suits the university's and the pre-service teachers' schedules is key to recruiting participants. Once time arrangements have been made and a group is ready to commit to the trip, the faculty leader needs to decide the goals of the service-learning experience. These goals will frame the decisions made in the planning of the trip.

A teacher educator who intends to act as a faculty leader for a trip abroad must choose a service-learning project in a host country that is appropriate for the course instructional goals. Students who participate in service-learning should be involved in meaningful work that provides opportunities for them to form relationships with members of the host culture. Ideally, pre-service teachers would have the opportunity to work in a school as volunteers. In this case, either the pre-service teachers must have some language skills in the target language of the host culture, or should assist in the teaching of English. The pre-service teachers may assist a teacher

with lessons; work with small groups, or tutor individual students who are struggling. This gives the pre-service teacher an opportunity to work with speakers of other languages without the full responsibility of the classroom. However, if schools will not accept volunteers without proficiency in the language of the host country, there are a large variety of service-learning projects to choose from where students would still have the opportunity to interact with people of the host culture. For example, students can volunteer in hospitals, homes for the elderly, environmental projects, construction projects, and community services for the economically disadvantaged.

If one goal of the course is to increase communication between pre-service teachers and the families of ELLs, one valuable component that can be added to a service-learning project abroad is to require language classes in the target language of the host country. The language classes serve a variety of goals in the experience. One goal is to provide the students with some basic skills in the language of the host country so that they can interact with the community during their time abroad. A second goal of providing language classes is to build empathy for ELLs among the pre-service teachers. The language classes will allow pre-service teachers to experience the emotions that an ELL may experience as he/she bears the burden of learning English in an ESL class only to be fully immersed in mainstream content classes that incorporate language well beyond what was learned in their ESL class. Finally, the pre-service teachers will be on the receiving end of comprehensible input in their language classes. As language students, they can draw upon this experience to identify strategies that can be used to make their own speech more comprehensible as teachers of ELLs. Given the opportunity for reflection and discussion, pre-service teachers can use their language learning experience to reflect upon teacher strategies, feedback, and attitudes that are helpful to them in navigating this new language.

Another decision that must be made by the faculty leader concerns accommodations. Homestays often allow for a much higher degree of cross-cultural communication than hotel or dormitory group accommodations. Host families will want to know about the student's family and life in the U.S. Students can bring photos of friends and family for conversation starters. Sharing meals with host families brings up opportunities for conversation that help build relationships, even if the language used is at a very basic level. The relationships students form with host families during a homestay can be a very powerful way for students to form a connection with the host culture that may last beyond the duration of your trip. If a homestay is not possible, the goal of creating cross-cultural communication opportunities can be reached by building other experiences into the trip where participants must interact with speakers of other languages at meal times and during the service-learning project.

Next, the faculty leader must think about how the service-learning will fit into pre-service teachers' academic experience. It is advisable to require assignments before, during, and after the experience. The pre-travel readings and assignments should help prepare your participants for the language and cultural demands of the trip. Travelers at all age levels, especially during their first time abroad, will undoubtedly compare everything in the host culture to their home culture. Without guidance and preparation, the initial differences and struggles encountered abroad may form the basis of negative stereotypes about the people of the host culture.

Participants must be prepared for culture shock by understanding what to expect in terms of food, personal space, living arrangements, and rules of politeness.

Assignments that are required during the trip should be kept to a minimum, but hold students accountable for the objectives of the experience. Remember that students' access to computers and internet service may be more limited than in the U.S. Also, students should be interacting with members of the host culture as much as possible rather than retreating to their rooms in the evenings to complete assignments. It is helpful to assign less time-intensive assignments on the trip, such as taking photos from their service-learning experience to illustrate a point or writing short journal entries about experiences while they are in the midst of cultural learning, such as reflections about their experiences in language classes or in their volunteer projects. These short tasks can be applied to longer assignments upon return. A final project can be completed later where students use information they gathered during the trip to show evidence of cultural learning.

After making decisions about the type of experience, the faculty leader must find an agency who offers service-learning experiences that match the trip goals. You can find agencies based in the U.S. and abroad who aid teachers in establishing service-learning projects. The host agency is normally responsible for arranging accommodations, language classes, service-learning projects, transportation, and tours. When travelling with a group, the faculty leader will want an agency that provides "one-stop shopping," meaning that there is only one agency or one contact person to help with a variety of situations. It is advisable to work with one host agency with an office located at your destination, rather than an agency that contracts the work out to multiple agencies or does not provide in-country contacts. When unforeseen circumstances arise, it is crucial to have support in the host country to help efficiently navigate problems such as travel delays or a serious medical emergency. Outside of emergency situations, a host agency can help with details of the arrangements in-country. There are numerous details that need attention such as deciding how the group gets from the airport to their accommodations, arranging transportation for tours during free time, finding places to exchange money, and matching students with host families. A faculty leader will want to give the group full attention and will not want to be overwhelmed by travel arrangements during the numerous teachable moments of the trip.

A service-learning trip at a glance

As a professor in an MA TESOL program, I organized a two week service-learning trip to Costa Rica for the pre-service teachers at my university. The trip was available to students enrolled in the MA TESOL program as well as all other teacher education programs. Three separate trips took place between 2010 and 2013 during the summer semester with a total of 28 pre-service teacher participants. Of the 28 pre-service teachers, 22 were enrolled in the MA TESOL program and six were enrolled in other education programs, including English and elementary education. Two of the participants were white males, two were African American females, one was a female international student from Russia, and the rest were white, American females. All pre-service teacher participants were native speakers of English, with the exception

of the Russian student, and all had some type of teaching experience ranging from field experience required for the teacher education program to full-time teaching jobs.

The pre-service teachers were assigned to work as teacher assistants in a preK-12 immersion school where most academic content is taught in English. The pre-service teachers were paired with a Costa Rican teacher who taught English language content matching the academic background and grade level of certification sought by the pre-service teacher. Most pre-service teacher participants assisted with small groups and worked with students who needed extra help, but those with more teaching experience taught full lessons.

Although they had varying backgrounds in Spanish language study, every pre-service teacher participant stayed with a Costa Rican host family. Sixteen of the pre-service teachers reported at least two years of prior Spanish study, but twelve reported no prior Spanish study. The participants were housed with a roommate from our group in order to help each other with communication. Also, the host agency provided our group with ten hours of Spanish language instruction per week focused on conversational skills. For the Spanish classes, our group was divided into smaller groups of beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels so that each participant would receive instruction appropriate to his/her level. In addition to the language classes, the host agency made arrangements for the school site placements, host family placements, and planned our weekend excursions, our evening activities, and transportation.

The service-learning trip was connected to a cultural diversity course required of all education students. The objective of the cultural diversity course is to examine theories and current research regarding the role of culture in the learning process. As a co-requisite to the cultural diversity course, students are expected to complete twenty hours of service-learning. The objective of the service-learning is for students to engage in interaction with non-native speakers of English, to learn about another culture through their interactions, and to question any previously held assumptions about other cultures or the students' own culture. The assignment connected to the service-learning experience required a written response to 3 different writing prompts during the trip. The writing prompts are as follows:

- What differences and similarities did you notice between the culture and lifestyle of Costa Rica and your own lifestyle and culture? Think about your host family and your experiences at the school site.
- What were some of the challenges you have experienced living in another culture?
- Describe any ideas about the culture, or about yourself and your own culture, that were challenged as a result of your experience in Costa Rica.

The responses to the writing prompts were collected and graded as part of the overall course grade. The responses to the writing prompts were the only assignments due during the service-learning trip, although other assignments connected to the cultural diversity course were required as the course continued upon return from Costa Rica.

- A Sample daily schedule for the service-learning trip to Costa Rica:
- Breakfast with host family
- Teaching assignment (usually 7:30-noon)

- Lunch at school
- Spanish class (usually 2:00-4:00)
- Cultural activities (such as cooking and dancing classes)
- Dinner with host family
- Free time in the evening

Pre-service teachers' impressions

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze autobiographical writings of the pre-service teachers, I will share some of the feedback I received about the service-learning trip. Overall, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive due to the connections that students made with Costa Ricans; particularly, their host families. Although many students admitted that they faced challenges communicating with their host families, they understood that part of the experience was to “walk in the shoes” of their future ELLs. A student who was initially hesitant to participate in the trip stated, “This was so good for me. I had to get out of my comfort zone.” Another student wrote an entire journal entry about her struggles with Spanish class. She reported that learning had always come easily to her, but being placed in a Spanish class with students who were more proficient in Spanish was hard for her. One student’s quote best summarizes how the goals of the service-learning trip were met through the struggles they encountered,

“Our time in Costa Rica paralleled the experiences of most of our students who receive ESL services in the United States. Until you really experience it yourself, it is difficult to fully appreciate the challenges posed by living and being educated in a foreign land, in a foreign language. I would suggest to all of my cohorts in the TESOL program that they should seriously consider participating in future trips of this sort.”

Pre-service teachers who participated in the trip received a follow-up questionnaire approximately one year later. Participants who were known to be employed as in-service teachers at the time the questionnaire was sent were asked if the experience in Costa Rica affected their teaching in any way. Many reported that the service-learning trip to Costa Rica helped them to understand the struggles faced by ELLs. The following quote is one example of a participant’s response.

“My experience in Costa Rica has affected me as a teacher. It really gave me the experience of being an ESL student in another country. I am even able to speak Spanish minimally, but living with a host family who spoke no English, working with Spanish-speaking kids, and traveling around a Spanish-speaking country really gave me the opportunity to understand what they feel like going to a new place where they don't know the language, the culture, or anything else and are just thrown into a classroom.”

As teacher educators know, it is possible to spend weeks or months teaching about cultural diversity, but no class activity can ever replace hands-on experience. The amount of cultural learning that can take place in such a short time abroad is truly fulfilling. It takes time to plan a quality service-learning experience, but the rewards that come when you hear your students making comments like those above make it well worth the time spent. With careful

planning and a good host agency, a service-learning project can be an excellent way to provide pre-service teachers with a cross-cultural experience that will help them to understand some of the struggles faced by their ELLs and hopefully help them to bridge the cultural gap.

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About the Author

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